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# Raid Left Scars on U.S.-Tunisia Ties

*Many Still See American Role in 1985 Israeli Attack on PLO*

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TUNIS—Seventeen months after Israel's bombing raid on the offices in Tunisia of the Palestine Liberation Organization, many Tunisians remain angry at the United States because of their conviction that the Reagan administration helped Israel carry out the strike.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

Although Jonathan J. Pollard, a former U.S. Navy intelligence analyst recently convicted in Washington of spying for Israel, has told the court in a presentencing statement that he, on his own, gave Israel vital American intelligence that facilitated the raid, Tunisian public opinion refuses to clear Washington of responsibility.

The facts appear less important here than the public conviction that the U.S. government betrayed historically friendly Tunisia.

Tunisia's official stance is that the strike was partly an Israeli attempt to harm Tunisian ties with the United States, and that it failed. In an interview, Foreign Minister Hedi Mabrouk said, "We are convinced that the United States in no way aided the raid," and that bilateral ties remain "solid and unaffected."

But former minister Ahmed Mes-tiri, leader of the moderate opposition Democratic Socialist Movement, said he recently warned visiting U.S. congressional staffers against thinking that Tunisian public opinion shared the government view about American innocence.

"Tunisia and the PLO were both victims," he said, reflecting what appears to be an apparently enduring impression here. He added, "Washington put friendship with Israel and Tunisia on the scales and chose Israel. The damage is irreparable."

Pollard, according to his court statement, gave Israel material on Libya's air defense system that aided Israel's Oct. 1, 1985, raid on PLO headquarters near Tunis, which killed 60 Palestinians and Tunisians. Some published reports have said that the material was aerial reconnaissance photos. In any case, Pollard's statement was carried here only by the most independent-minded of Tunisia's otherwise officially controlled daily press.

Pollard's statement and published reports appeared to support the U.S. government's declaration that it played no role in the Israeli air strike. But interviews with western diplomats, Palestinians and Tunisians suggest that the lack of public reaction here reflects a lasting popular disillusionment with the United States, long regarded here as a trusted friend.

In an ironic contrast, a top PLO official said he now believes that the information for the raid came from the disaffected Pollard, and was not supplied officially by Washington.

Salah Khalaf, a leading aide of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, recalled that his organization had initially accused the United States of connivance in the raid. Now, he said, he credited Pollard's statement of responsibility and was willing to absolve the United States "on the intelligence side, but not the political side."

"I had been under the impression that relations between Washington and Tel Aviv did not require spies," he said.

Reflecting an apparent desire to avoid any new local debate on the raid or its wider implications, the State Department has instructed American diplomats here not to comment publicly on the matter of Pollard's support to Israel in the raid.

"It's going to open up old wounds

which were just beginning to heal," an American resident said.

An American diplomat in Tunisia said privately of U.S.-Tunisian relations, "We are no longer friends, just countries which may have interests in common."

Israel bombed the PLO office in retaliation for the killing, by Palestinian gunmen, of three Israelis in Cyprus. Many Tunisians, stunned that the Israeli jets had struck from 1,500 miles across the Mediterranean, assumed that the U.S. 6th Fleet must have been aware of the planes, and that the United States might have helped them evade the radar of neighboring Libya.

Tunisians' shock and suspicions were compounded by an apparent American endorsement of the raid in an initial announcement by the White House that it constituted "a legitimate response and an expression of self-defense." Crowds of angry Tunisians had to be held back from the U.S. Embassy, and the prowestern government of President Habib Bourguiba told Washington that it feared it might be overturned by street violence.

Since the late 1950s, when Washington provided critical aid to the newly independent Tunisia, the United States has offered itself as a reliable friend—and many Tunisians have assumed that it would protect their small country from the violence of the Middle East conflict.

This assumption was reinforced in 1982 when, at Washington's request, Tunisia agreed to harbor the PLO headquarters after Israel's invasion forced the group out of Lebanon.

Western diplomats here and Tunisian analysts argue that, in conducting the raid, Israel sought to sow discord between Washington and all moderate Arab states, and between the PLO and the Tunisian government.